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ARE THE CLASSICS DOOMED?

By D. C. PARKER

ARE the classics doomed? If we ask this question it is because there is a current of unrest in some quarters which it would be futile to ignore. The modern spirit of enquiry is abroad and no mere sentimental consideration is permitted to arrest its activities. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and many others on whose brows History has set the laurel wreath of wisdom and heroism are subjected to a close scrutiny by those with new ears and new eyes. There is nothing alarming in this. Every reasonable person knows that the verdict of competent criticism is more to be desired than the fulsome flattery of assumption, and the masters will leave the hands of the most rigorous expert with plenty of virtue to their credit. We can understand the man who says in effect, "I have been told Beethoven is a great composer. I am not content with what I have been told. I am going to put the assertion to proof." But we have to face a kind of impatience or dissatisfaction that is manifesting itself at the present time. What are you going to say to the man who tells you that Bach is a bore, Mozart trivial, Schubert sugary, Beethoven tedious?

What we must do, I think, is to search for the cause of this sense of dissatisfaction. Is it in the man himself? If it be due to an obvious inability to recognise a good thing, there is nothing more to be said. If it be not, we have to trace the feeling of disappointment to its source. This, I believe, is to be attributed in many cases to the effect of modern music on certain temperaments. The music of these times is ubiquitous. Of necessity, criticism is largely concerned with composers whose works provide ample texts and are prolific in critical interest. Stravinsky, Schönberg, Grainger, Strauss, Ravel, Delius, Casella—the commentator finds a multitude of themes to discuss in connection with their art. Along with this goes, in various centres, frequency of performance. So some people keenly alive to the value and interest of contemporary music are quite naturally influenced by it. What to the rigid conservative is chaos is not chaos to them. What seems daring to the mandarin is to the explorer the merest commonplace. The quickness of thought, the freedom of form, the tossing aside of *clichés*—with all of these the eager student of modernism is

thoroughly at home. The appearance of the unexpected does not disturb his equanimity, for he expects the unexpected. The disdain of convention troubles him not at all, for unconventionality is itself a convention.

We have to imagine one immersed in and much affected by a study of the modern bards listening to Schubert's C major Symphony, or the C minor of Beethoven. He may tell us that Schubert is leisurely. The composer takes a long time to tell his story. We can often anticipate what is to come. The variety and attractiveness of up-to-date scoring are not present to speed the work on its way. To get anything out of this situation it is necessary to remember that appreciation is a very subtle thing. To examine the *rationale* of appreciation would necessitate a lengthy *excursus* which cannot here be permitted. But it may be assumed that appreciation is of three kinds, intellectual, sensuous, and intellectual and sensuous. Intellectual appreciation fails because music is an emotional art and the ultimate test of any composer is his power of song. If a composer have no wings he cannot by any reckoning be called great. To say this is not by any means to say that intellectual appreciation does not bring thrills of its own. Sensuous appreciation is that of people who are content to allow music to play upon them, to excite or otherwise affect them; they have no curiosity concerning it, no desire to find out how the effect of this or that is obtained. There remains that kind of appreciation which is a delicate blend of mind and soul, the kind of appreciation which neither makes of music a mechanical affair, nor yet regards it as an intoxicant. The difficulty of touching this point with advantage is substantially increased by the fact that in appreciation apprehension plays a large and important part. The artistic nature knows that such and such a thing is right, and this knowledge is founded on an instinct and cannot be proved by mathematics.

It is plain, then, that music is largely what we bring into its presence. The "approach" is always a vital matter and if we listen to the classics we must listen without vain preoccupation. It is foolish to expect the *tempo* of the twentieth century from the nineteenth, the melody of Wagner from Mozart, the mood of the romanticists from the contrapuntists, the scoring of Liszt or Rimsky-Korsakoff from Haydn. The literary man knows very well that the vocabulary of Chaucer is not that of Henry James, the style of Shakespeare not that of Barrie. But he does not judge the earlier writers from the standpoint of the later, and one has no right to judge the classics from the standpoint of the moderns.

There is a unanimity in all human effort, as Emerson remarked. Ultimately all good musicians meet on common ground, in that they seek to express that which is in them. It is the methods of expression which differ, and allowance ought surely to be made for this simple fact. One must, consequently, be aware of the temper of the age, the master-thought of the time, the prevailing customs, the means at the disposal of the composer, if one is to do him justice. Without the exercise of the historical sense it is difficult to see how the musician can arrive at any accurate assessment of writers, whether of the past or the present.

Do we compromise when we ask for the exercise of this historical faculty? I do not think so. What does the intelligent person expect from Mozart or Beethoven? Obviously what Mozart or Beethoven has to give. If you are not unreasonable in your demand, you ought to find some grounds for satisfaction. This notwithstanding, the objection may be put forward that in spite of all the talk about environment and the spirit of the time, the music of the classicists is, frankly, dull. One must be sure that, in saying this, one has given it the benefit of approaching it with "a clean slate." There is the larger view which if a man possess he will not allow himself to be robbed of many riches by a conspiracy of circumstance. He will not allow himself to be robbed of the past because he has penetrated the secret of the present. He will not gain Scriabin at the expense of Mozart, Stravinsky at that of Bach. The world is a large place. It has toys for the babe, instruments for strong hands, a store of memories for the aged. On every side lies untold wealth. Petöfi sings the freedom of the plains, Scott the land of the mountain and the flood. Art, like the world, is a mirror. To the vital and interested personality every hedgerow proclaims its beauty, every man is a history, every city a great stage on which is acted daily an unending drama. But one must insist that the reality of all this beauty and romance and pathos and interminable interest is evident only to those with eyes to gaze upon them. In music we must take the large and open view. We must see the blood-relationship between the past and the present. The sanest modernism is that which has a strong sense of association, which makes us conscious of the links in the chain that the centuries have forged, which recognises the growth of ideas, which subscribes to the fact that all artists have their ancestry. It is this modernism which shows us the figures of the past and present rubbing shoulders on the vast tapestry of history. I say this as one intensely interested in the music of the time, as one aware that the phrase

“modern music” represents much. Eclecticism is an admirable thing, and it is not an enemy of the right kind of catholicity. He pays a big price for his understanding of and delight in modern works who finds the music of the past utterly destitute of interest and charm.

The plea for the exercise of the historical sense is, therefore, a thoroughly justifiable one; the more so because to see the classics as they are is not easy, and to see modern music as it is, decidedly difficult. The measure of a man’s dissatisfaction is not the measure of his education unless discrimination be enthroned. It is, surely, an aim of education to give a man a sense of the real richness of art, to develop his power of selection, to help him to derive the greatest possible benefit from all that has been accomplished. One does not need to be told that the good thing and the valuable is not to be found only in one country or in one period. The entire world holds up its gifts with both hands and asks your acceptance in persuasive accents. The question of praise or blame is concerned solely with merits or defects, and these can be dealt with satisfactorily only if we equip ourselves patiently for the task. We may meet our fretful modernist friends to the extent of agreeing that a restatement of our attitude to the classics is imperatively called for. The musical Homer sometimes nods, the musical sun is not without its spots, and the classical master must be neither a superstition nor one of a group of infallible beings. We sometimes feel that mechanism shouts its triumph over inspiration, and long for the composer to get into his stride again; there are moments when the homage paid to traditional etiquette seems to us altogether excessive. But the recognition of this gives no sanction for wholesale condemnation. Our concern is to hold the balance justly.

It is inevitable that estimates of the music of the past should change from time to time. In its own way and according to its own fashion, every generation sets about the business of giving or withholding marks. New discoveries mean not only an enlargement of music’s domains, but an alteration in our attitude towards what is familiar to ear and eye. Monteverde and Gluck, to cite extreme cases, are not to us what they were to their contemporaries. To-day few people are likely to discover in Gluck and Spontini all that Berlioz found there. The continual sifting is all to the good. It has a twofold effect. It tends to make us conscious of the defects of a man, and of these we ought to be conscious if we are to see him as he is; it tends to make us conscious of the greatness of a man whose powers have not hitherto been fully acknowledged.

A really important matter to recognise is that a distaste for or impatience with the music of the past advertises a distinct limitation of sympathies, that it is, in fact, a defect, and not a proof of superiority. Much could be written against fulsome adoration of the classics and the vain repetition of the items by which they are most widely known. And who can measure the amount of harm done to the cause of classical music by the injudicious advocate and the objectionable defender? How often, alas, does the man whose mind is closed, barred and bolted against liberal movements and progressive tendencies pose as the staunch champion of Bach and Mozart and Beethoven in a wicked world running its riotous and unseemly course to the wanton and unashamed strains of modernism; how often does he speak as though he and he alone had access to their inner secrets and knew the magic formula which opens the treasure-cave! Nevertheless, as I have hinted, the classics can stand the most searching criticism in that, after all has been said and done, they will yet have something to say to us. Bach, for example, is full of suggestiveness. The vigorous fibre of his music and the vital play incidental to the contrapuntal style make him far more modern than many writers of more recent date; and Mozart, whose sense of economy, balance, and note values has been admired by many composers, still has an interest for those occupied with the technique of writing.

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There are times when we are impressed by the odyssey of the art-work. At its birth it has much antagonism to face and, if it survive the encounter, it passes to the slightly less hostile atmosphere of controversy. This phase is usually succeeded by that of almost general acceptance. Then comes, perhaps, the attitude of disparagement. So what commenced its career in the salon of the rejected may terminate it in the necropolis of art, the museum. Art is long and life is short, and man, an ephemeral animal, sees things in terms of his own duration upon the earth. The hills and sea alone are the silent witnesses of the death of what we call immortality. Are the classics, then, immortal? Will Beethoven be played a hundred years after this date? This latter question we can safely leave to posterity. It is for posterity to set the matter in the right focus according to its light. What we are called upon to decide is whether the classics have any interest for us, whether they touch a responsive note in our humanity, whether they give us visions that leave us less forlorn.

Let the reader pronounce judgment according to his temperament and disposition. But let him not forget that what has meant so much to so many musical people will not be dealt the death-blow by the cheap disparagement of egotistical superiority. Than that of giving the classicists and the modernists their places, few more urgent critical tasks exist. A thing is not great because it was written by one whose name is to be found in impressive volumes; a thing is not small in interest and unworthy of attention because a man named Smith who lives over the way penned it. We must concentrate on the essential and bear in mind that true insight is born of sympathy.